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Teaching on the frontline: The confines of teachers' contributions to conflict transformation in Lebanon*

Erik van Ommering

Abstract Current education and peacebuilding literature invests high expectations in the ability of teachers to catalyse positive transformations in societies affected by armed conflict. Yet, very little is known about the actual experiences of teachers in such situations, or the strategies they employ to generate conducive learning environments. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Lebanese schools, this paper proposes a framework to understand the confines of teachers' peacebuilding capacities. Of central importance herein are the socio-political context of teaching; teachers' relationships with students, colleagues, and parents; teachers' personal biographies; as well as the tools available to confront conflict inside the classroom.

Key words Teaching, armed conflict, conflict transformation, ethnography, Lebanon

Highlights

- Critically examines the expectations invested in teachers' roles as peacebuilders.
- Introduces teaching work in debates on education's role in conflict transformation.
- Presents findings from ethnographic field research with teachers in Lebanon.
- Shows how conflict shapes teachers' lives, social relations, and pedagogies.
- Calls for tailored interventions to bolster teachers' peacebuilding potential.

High expectations are invested in the capacity of teachers to act as catalysts of positive change in societies affected by armed conflict. Teachers are expected to act as

- Peacebuilders who “teach children how to live together in peace by overcoming prejudice within and between individuals and communities” (Sindhi 2016), while fostering “values and attitudes that offer a basis for transforming conflict” (Novelli and Smith 2011);
- Guardians of quality education whose “behaviour, attitudes, motivation, and training are key to ensuring that a quality learning environment is maintained” (Dupuy 2008; see also Kirk and Winthrop 2008, 877);
- Socialising agents responsible for providing the environment and encouragement for learning (Berns, 2001 as paraphrased in Dupuy 2008) while conveying their own and their students' national identity and ambitions (Makkawi 2002);
- Proponents of civic standards who “teach the skills required for civic participation and employment [...] in conflict zones” (Sindhi 2016);
- Catalysts of political change who deepen students' critical awareness through “active learning methods” such as “reflective discussions [...], debates, presentation, and group and cooperative projects” that “encourage the exploration of different viewpoints” (Sindhi 2016);
- Graduates of appropriate teacher education programmes in which teachers are equipped with conflict analysis tools that enable them to “understand their own experiences in relation to the conflict” and establish “context sensitive and learner appropriate classrooms and pedagogies” (Sindhi 2016).

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This paper suggests that many of these expectations, however valuable, do not or only to a limited degree reflect the lived realities of teachers in situations of armed conflict. To put it more strongly: no evidence exists that teachers working in divided societies necessarily engage with questions of peacebuilding or conflict prevention in the first place. We may understand their perspectives on, and responses to, violent strife by looking at the ways in which conflict permeates, firstly, the wider socio-political and economic context in which teachers work, secondly, their relationships with students, colleagues, and school administrators, thirdly, teachers' personal biographies and, finally, the tools at their disposal to confront conflict inside the classroom. Hence, appreciating the confines of teachers' potential roles in conflict transformation, and formulating strategies that can enable teachers to fulfil their peacebuilding potential, necessitates insight into the ways in which armed conflict shapes their everyday work and life. Only then will we be able to provide relevant teacher support that is in line with teachers' actual experiences, priorities, and needs.

The paper commences by reassessing education's peacebuilding promise in general, and teachers' anticipated contributions to conflict transformation in specific. Drawing on scholarly and applied literature, I note that the perspectives and experiences of teachers are rarely reflected in the literature, and so are efforts to understand teaching work in its wider socio-political context. Joining insights from studies that relate to teaching in situations of armed conflict with findings of my own ethnographic research, I propose a framework that can help us better understand how teachers' capacity to act as agents of change is confined. This framework is subsequently applied to a discussion of findings from ethnographic fieldwork with teachers in Lebanese elementary schools. The conclusion further refines the framework and is followed by recommendations outlining how teachers' capacity to contribute to transforming conflict can be strengthened.

1. Reassessing education's peacebuilding potential

The hopes invested in teachers' contributions to conflict transformation mirror the positive outcomes usually associated with the provision of education in conflict-affected societies. Both scholarly and applied work tends to approach education as an inherently benign factor in war-torn countries, lauding its "critical role [...] in the wider reconstruction of the society, from building peace and social cohesion to facilitating economic recovery and getting the country onto an accelerated development path" (The World Bank 2005, 27). Significantly, the UN Special Envoy for Global Education claimed early on in 2016 that a failure to extend access to education to conflict-affected societies would result in "a 'full-blown global crisis' that would haunt the world for three generations." Claims like these seem oblivious to literature that highlights education's inherently political character and, as a consequence, its potential to exacerbate, rather than resolve, political conflicts by promoting political divisions, cultural repression, manipulation of children's self-worth and socio-political allegiances, reinforcement of stereotypes and xenophobia, violent indoctrination, reproduction of gender inequalities, fuelling of essentialist identities, as well as corporal and sexual punishment of students and teachers (see for instance Burde 2014; Bush and Saltarelli 2000; Davies 2004, 2005, 2010; INEE Working Group on Education and Fragility 2010; Novelli and Lopes Cardozo 2008; Salmi 2000 in Seitz 2004; Smith and Vaux 2003; Van Ommering 2011; Zembylas, Charalambous, and Charalambous 2011).

The failure to recognise education's political and potentially disruptive underpinnings, not least in contexts where legitimacy and authority are heavily disputed, is reflected in a good deal of policy discussions. Novelli and Lopes Cardozo (2008) note, for example, that much education policy work is donor-driven rather than based on in-depth research. Accordingly, they argue, it tends to avoid critical analysis, fails to situate education in its socio-economic, cultural, and political context, and disregards the perspectives of education's most central stakeholders: students and teachers (Cardozo and Hoeks 2015; O'Sullivan 2002; Van Ommering 2015; Vongalis-Macrow 2006; Weinstein, Freedman, and Hughson 2007). The lack of accounts that acknowledge the socio-political contexts in which schooling is situated, and relate this to teachers' and students' perspectives of teaching and learning, is salient. Especially so when considering the substantial funding that is channelled to education programming in conflict-affected countries, and the ubiquitous calls for 'quality,' 'relevant,' 'contextualised,' and 'conflict-sensitive' education (cf. Smith 2005). These concepts all necessitate a degree of grounding in the lived realities of education's prime protagonists.

Research that foregrounds how teachers' and students' experiences of schooling are tied to armed conflict in particular settings is therefore urgently needed, and so are studies that explicate more comprehensively how curricula, textbooks, training, didactics, and modes of assessment can preclude the harm that education may potentially inflict or reinforce. This plea for research echoes in academic accounts calling for studies that illuminate "the realities of teachers' lives" (Wolf et al. 2015) and teachers' perspectives on social transformation and peacebuilding (Kirk 2004, 57). Such studies should recognise that "the reality of everyday life [for teachers in conflict settings] is a maelstrom of on-going conflict, the emotional consequences of trauma, the promulgation of stereotypes, the fear of violence in classrooms, and fractured attempts to find a way to live together with former enemies" (Weinstein, Freedman, and Hughson 2007, 57).

Despite appeals for more research, scholarship on teaching in conflict-affected communities remains scarce (Kirk and Winthrop 2008; Weber 2007; Wolf et al. 2015). This can partly be attributed to challenges related to gaining access to research sites, as well as to this field's positioning in between disciplines that focus on either teaching or on conflict, but rarely on both simultaneously. Within the realm of education sciences, on the one hand, elaborate scholarship exists on teaching, teacher education, and teachers' perceptions of their work. The geographical scope of this work, however, has been "lopsided in favour of [...] the situation in industrialized countries over the past two decades" (Weber 2007, 293; see also Wolf et al. 2015). As a consequence, educationalists define teaching almost exclusively in terms that apply to only a minority of educational settings worldwide, while the experiences of the global majority of teachers go unnoticed (Weber 2007; see also Kirk 2004). This is a noteworthy gap in itself, but becomes particularly problematic in light of educationalists' attempts to contribute to debates on globalization and modernity (Weber 2007). Anthropological accounts, on the other hand, explore the experiences of young and old caught up in conflict and distress. In view of the discipline's longstanding focus on childrearing and, more recently, on young people's encounters with war, as well as its powerful contributions to debates on modernity and power, the discipline's lack of attention to formal schooling in conflict settings is rather puzzling (see also Burde 2014; King 2014; Paulson and Rappleye 2007).

2. Towards an analytical framework for understanding teaching in sites of conflict

Nevertheless, we can derive important insights from studies that touch upon the experiences of teachers as they engage with specific curricula or projects in places affected by violent conflict (as opposed to studies that focus on teaching as work). These accounts centre, for instance, on civics education (Akar 2012; Niens, O'Connor, and Smith 2013), history (Baranović, Jokić, and Doolan 2007), peace education (Cardozo and Hoeks 2015; Zembylas et al. 2011), integrated schooling (Kilpatrick and Leitch 2004), or on educational interventions (Kirk and Winthrop 2008). Based on analysis of this scholarship, as well as patterns observed in my own research data (see below), I suggest four areas that are key to understanding the confines of teachers' roles in conflict transformation. In order to do so, we need to consider how armed conflict shapes:

1. The social, political, economic, and institutional context of teaching work: rather than looking at teaching in isolation, contextualisation of teachers work (as advanced by Kirk and Winthrop 2008 on Afghanistan; Makkawi 2002 on Palestine; Nasser and Wong 2013 on Palestine; Wolf et al. 2015 on the DRC) will make us more aware of the constraints put on teachers' ability to act as agents of change in contentious places (Makkawi 2002). These constraints include the ways in which gender constructs shape employment and ascribed responsibilities in social change (Kirk 2004 on Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and South Sudan);
2. Relations with students, colleagues, parents, and school administrators: all of whom hold strong opinions about the problems that schools face and desired trajectories for change (Bekerman and Zembylas 2010 on Palestine and Israel; Weinstein, Freedman, and Hughson 2007, 65 on Croatia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Rwanda). Moreover, it is important to heed the role of emotions in these relationships, and examine how these are informed by conflict and distress (Akar 2012 on Lebanon; Arlow 2002 on Northern Ireland; Baranović, Jokić, and Doolan 2007 on Croatia; Vongalis-Macrow 2006 on Iraq; Weinstein, Freedman, and Hughson 2007; Zembylas and Bekerman 2008 on Cyprus and Israel; Zembylas, Charalambous, and Charalambous 2011 on Cyprus). Some scholars found that teachers in conflict zones may prioritise improved relations with colleagues and superiors over material needs such as reduced class sizes or increased compensation (Kirk and Winthrop 2008; Wolf et al. 2015);
3. Teachers' personal biographies: only by seeing teachers as persons exposed to violence and insecurity themselves, we can get to an understanding of their motivations and capacities (Wolf et al. 2015). It is critical to acknowledge that violence affecting teachers does not necessarily consist of largescale acts of warfare but just as much of the small but fundamental acts of violence in everyday life (Kilpatrick and Leitch 2004 on Northern Ireland; Weinstein, Freedman, and Hughson 2007);
4. The tools available to teachers to confront conflict inside the classroom: we should assess how teaching methods and pedagogies, including evaluation of students, echo conflict dynamics (Akar 2006, 2012 on Lebanon; Cardozo and Hoeks 2015; Colenso 2005; Weinstein, Freedman, and Hughson 2007). The tools at teachers' disposal are shaped by pre- and in-service professional development opportunities or the lack thereof (Akar 2012 on Lebanon; Kirk and Winthrop 2008). Curricula and textbooks, in turn, may either support or complicate efforts to deal with conflict inside the classroom (Akar 2012; Cardozo and Hoeks 2015; Makkawi 2002; Nasser and Wong 2013; Weinstein, Freedman, and Hughson 2007). We are advised to look beyond tangible tools and take note of silence and non-discursive means as strategies to cope with conflict (Akar 2012; Cardozo and Hoeks 2015 on Sri Lanka; Colenso 2005 on Sri Lanka; Davies 2005 on the UK; Kilpatrick and Leitch 2004; Weinstein, Freedman, and Hughson 2007).

This preliminary framework will now be applied on a case study that elicits the experiences of elementary school teachers in Lebanon. Before presenting the findings of fieldwork, I discuss its underlying methodology.

3. Methodology

Eliciting the perspectives and experiences of teachers in situations of armed conflict is best achieved, according to Weber (2007, 294), through "empirically based anthropological [...] work that analyses [teachers'] lived experiences on the ground" (see also O'Sullivan 2002, 220). Ethnography, anthropology's hallmark methodology, embodies a keen eye for subjective human experience and is especially suited to capture complex social phenomena (O'Reilly 2012). It typically relies on interaction with interlocutors over a prolonged period of time, often through participant observation and other mostly qualitative methods of data collection. The ethnographic method enables the researcher to get closer to grasping both discursive and unspoken aspects of social and cultural phenomena (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011). Through partaking in the everyday life of research participants, the researcher encounters a wide variety of practices, routines, sensations, and discourse, which are ultimately laid down in ethnographic texts through a process of reflexive analysis (O'Reilly 2012).

My doctoral research draws on sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork between 2007 and 2012 in five elementary schools communities in Lebanon. The present article builds on data collected during six successive months in a school in rural South Lebanon (which I will call Al Qamar), and during three months in a school in Haret Hreik, a suburb in the south of Lebanon's capital Beirut (which I will refer to as Al Arz). Data collection relied primarily on participant observation in day-to-day school life. I accompanied teachers as they prepared lesson plans and taught their classes, had their coffee during recess, reprimanded and rewarded students, endured criticism from the school administration, engaged with textbooks and syllabi, and received dissatisfied parents after term exams. As the months passed by we increasingly came to share key events in our personal lives that solidified the trust that is so essential for a productive ethnographic research relationship. This coincided with exploring the schools' surroundings upon invitation of teachers and students, who toured me around their homes, villages, fields, and valleys.

The result of this attempt at immersion in everyday school life resulted in a considerable number of field diaries, photographs, maps, drawings, sketches, and audio and video recordings. Aside from participant observation I employed more proactive research methods including semi-structured interviews, teaching, and projective and enabling exercises such as debate and play. All data were organised and coded using qualitative data analysis software which helped distil significant themes and patterns that informed the analytical framework proposed above.

The sample set and methodology imply that I can neither claim to offer a comprehensive or representative picture of schooling and teaching in Lebanon, nor findings that can simply be applied to conflict-affected contexts elsewhere. Instead, the aim of this paper is to employ the strength of ethnography to gain insight into the multiple factors, processes, and interrelationships that jointly constitute the work of teaching in a situation of armed conflict. By translating the particularities of this field study back to the analytical framework, it helps refine our conceptual understanding

of teaching work in volatile settings. This, I hope, will render enhanced understanding of the education-conflict nexus in general, and support the development of more comprehensive and effective tools to support teachers in confronting divisions and violence in their everyday work in specific.

In the following I have substituted all names of interlocutors and places with pseudonyms in an attempt to protect their identity. Throughout my time in the field I ensured to introduce myself as researcher, and I informed and regularly re-informed my interlocutors of the purpose of my study and the option to withdraw their input from the data set. Data have been collected using a mixture of English, Arabic, and French. Translations are my own.

4. Background to the field study

A brief background note on armed conflict in Lebanon, as well as the country's education system, is helpful to contextualise the ensuing field study. First, the backdrop of armed conflict against which teachers' lives are set is marked by tangible and tacit manifestations of Lebanon's lengthy civil wars (1975 until 1990), Israeli occupation (1982 until 2000), warfare between Hezbollah and Israel (2006), regular flare-ups of sectarian violence during which armed militias take to the streets, assassinations and abductions, front-line dynamics of the Arab-Israeli conflict, decades of displacement of Palestinian refugees, as well as the growing impact of violence and displacement caused by the wars in Syria since 2011.

Second, the two selected schools are certified private schools that follow the Lebanese national curriculum. Private education is the norm rather than the exception in Lebanon, where more than seventy percent of students attends private education (Hamdan 2013; see Yaacoub and Badre 2012) of varying quality and cost. Private schools have the liberty to appoint teachers and select textbooks and methods of their own liking, as long as these do not conflict with national curricula, public order, good morals, or the dignity of one of the country's religious currents (Frayha 2003; see also Hamdan 2013 as well as article 10 of the Lebanese constitution). Private education has a strong appeal as opposed to public schooling, which is – not always accurately – plagued by a reputation of low quality, overcrowded classrooms, worn down infrastructure, and unmotivated teachers. Many contextual factors are shared by private and public schools, while employment conditions may differ in certain respects (as outlined below); which means that general observations from this study bear relevance to the education sector as a whole in Lebanon, but cannot be applied directly to each and every school.

We now turn to the field. Upon setting the scene, starting in rural Al Qamar and only later turning to urban Al Arz, I will discuss findings along the central themes of the analytical framework introduced above. First, a close look is taken at how conflict marks the social, political, economic, and institutional context of teaching work. Second, we move to the ways in which conflict shapes teachers' relations with students, colleagues, and school administrators. Third, the impact of personal experiences of armed violence on teachers' work is presented. Fourth, we look at the tools available to teachers to confront conflict inside their classrooms.

5. Teaching in conflict-affected classrooms in Lebanon

5.1 Context: how contextual factors constrain teachers' involvement in conflict transformation

"Welcome to Al Qamar," Abou Bilal tells me on a grey winter morning in January 2011. "Feel free to join classes, teach, and organise activities. Just let me know if you need anything." Such was the start of my fieldwork in South Lebanon. A couple of minutes later I find myself squeezed inside a wooden desk in the back of grade four, with thirty-two curious students staring at me. Leen, their English teacher, is an energetic woman, twenty-six years old, who holds a BA in English literature from a local Lebanese university and is now nearly halfway through her third year as an English teacher at Al Qamar. Her school is situated at the edge of Daya'a, a village set on the coastal hills of South Lebanon. Al Qamar's students typically hail from lower middleclass backgrounds. Some of their parents run small agricultural or commercial businesses, a good deal of fathers are employed by the army or other national security forces. All live in the towns and villages surrounding Daya'a.

Abou Bilal is a local businessman and owner of Al Qamar, which he founded shortly after returning from abroad in the wake Lebanon's civil wars. Al Qamar is registered as a private school with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education. Priding himself on being unaffected by the "civil war mentality" due to his time in exile, Abou Bilal has made sure to appoint staff from all dominant confessional backgrounds present in the school's vicinity: Shi'a Muslims from Daya'a, Christians from the neighbouring village, and Sunni Muslims from a nearby town. He even recruited a Palestinian calligraphy teacher from a camp in the vicinity of Daya'a. Al Qamar's teaching body consists of nineteen teachers who each teach one or two subjects. Aside from three married male teachers, there are eleven unmarried women in the twenties and five married women. As executive director he appointed a distant family member, Mrs. Nour, who holds a BA in business administration. Her imposing authority plays a key role in "controlling" the school population, as highlighted below.

"We have no rights": Weak state authority leaves teachers unprotected

The autonomy of private schools has significant consequences for Leen and her colleagues. Whereas public school teachers are appointed for life (upon passing teacher college and satisfying sectarian quota) and can only be laid off by presidential decree, private school teachers may just receive an annual contract that sometimes does not even cover the summer break. "We have no protection," Leen explains. "If the director wants to sack us he can do so at his convenience. Usually I hear by the start of the summer break if I can come back for the next schoolyear or not. And if we can't come back, then it's usually already too late to apply for a job in another school."

While private school teachers are supposed to be compensated according to a national salary scale, school owners such as Abou Bilal can easily ignore such obligations, as Leen's demonstrates:

I get paid 400 US dollar per month for teaching twenty-seven hours a week. When I asked the director about this, he just told me that I still live with my parents and that I come from a rich family, so I don't need the money... [pauses and looks agitated] I mean, first of all that's my private life and not his business, and besides, even if I don't need the money, don't I deserve it for doing my job? He makes me feel like ... I'm a slave, really!

The mandatory contribution to the national social security fund is not necessarily observed either. "We were promised health insurance at the start of the year, but this never happened, so I had to buy expensive private insurance." When Leen one morning told me about her plans to get married, she added that this would imply she would not be hired the next schoolyear. "When I told Mrs. Nour, she replied that I am not allowed to get pregnant. She said that she will even make me sign for that. Imagine! We have no rights!"

Surely, teachers do have rights, but knowing and attaining these is challenging. There is no one that teachers can turn to for protection unless they have a powerful family member, for instance a member of parliament, mayor, or militia member. If teachers complain, they will

simply be told that if they do not like the school, they are advised to apply elsewhere. The weak rule of law and absence of sanctions on non-compliance with rules and regulations, combined with bleak job opportunities elsewhere, leave Leen and her colleagues limited options other than to acquiesce to what they are currently offered.

5.2 Relationships: how conflict and adverse working conditions adversely affect teachers' relationships with school administrators, colleagues, students, and parents

The insecurity and exploitation experienced by teachers with regard to their employment negatively impact their relations with colleagues, students, and parents. This becomes tangible during the time shared over breaks and in between teaching hours, which are usually spent in the teachers' lounge. Here, teachers discuss family matters, cautiously critique the school administration, review world affairs (such as the outbreak of hostilities in Syria and the "Arab Spring"), and chat with family and friends. Rarely, if at all, these moments are used to discuss educational or pedagogical questions that originate in everyday teaching work; at most, an overheated teacher barges in and vents out her frustration right upon surviving an embattled hour. "What happens inside the classroom, stays inside the classroom" and discussing professional needs and performance seems close to taboo.

This absence of discussions on teaching was not only informed by the understandable urge to relax and distance oneself from frequently stressful classroom encounters, but just as much by a sense of competition among colleagues over reputation and employment. Teachers carefully hide their employment conditions from one another. Naturally, friendships do develop among some, such as between Leen and Carine, a recently divorced female teacher. Every once in a while they share resources, project ideas, or training opportunities, attempting to make the most out of their time in school. "We refuse to just come here to give our lesson and go home like the others." Together, they criticise the prevailing teaching modality in which "students just sit and the teachers fill them with knowledge." Through the schoolyear they share some of their frustrations. Carine comforted Leen when, at the end of the school year, she learned that Abou Bilal had offered a junior colleague double Leen's salary plus insurance to replace her during the ensuing schoolyear. "I feel empty..., nervous..., " Leen said as tears dropped down her cheeks. "Seriously, I don't need this school. 400 dollars, I can find it anywhere. Why would I cry for this place?" Overwhelmed with what she described as "abuse and betrayal" Leen left Al Qamar.

There was one other teacher who covertly held a passion for education: Hassan, a Palestinian widower born "four years after 1948," who each day takes the pain of crossing a notoriously violent Palestinian refugee camp to come and teach calligraphy at Al Qamar for "near to no pay." Rather than teaming up with his younger and female colleagues, Hassan spends his time alone chain-smoking on a balcony overlooking the playground. Hassan laments the distrust among school administrators and teachers, as well as the lack of professional support and supervision at Al Qamar, just like in other schools where he taught.

There is no encouragement from the administration. No training. They only bother you with ignorance. You know, everything looks nice on the surface here: the playground, the school garden... But that's only the surface. They [the school administrators] don't care about education. They don't know about education. They just build a building, hire some teachers, accept all students without entry exams, and then they congratulate themselves on owning a school. Listen, it's a business; they do it for the money!

"Not a single word!!!!" Lack of trust and training favours pedagogies of rote and repression

Considering their insecure work environment, both in terms of contract and relations with colleagues and superiors, I often wondered what could still motivate Leen, Carine, and their colleagues to give their best energy to teaching. For some of them it is the pure necessity of generating income to support their families, while others such as Leen highlight an additional source of reward: "our students. They drive us crazy every single day," she would underline, "and we have to be very strict with them, but still, most of them, they love their teachers." Many students curiously combine a resistance to the rigid and unappealing regimes in school with a strong attachment to their teachers – even amid the heat of everyday classroom scuffles. We see the youngest students run up to hug their teacher each morning, while slightly older children write "I love you Ms. Leen" on their exam sheets and shower her with flowers carefully picked from their springtime gardens. The eldest students express their approval in less visible but still powerful ways by, for instance when grade seven collectively refused to participate in a regional English language competition once the school administration appointed another teacher to supervise them instead of Carine. The importance of teachers' efforts and presence for students is a key factor that fuels teachers' self-esteem and satisfaction.

Regardless, a 50-minute class frequently feels more like a battle of attrition than a constructive pedagogical exchange. As soon as students enter the classroom, the teacher's focus becomes centred on "control." This pursuit of control contrasts sharply with students' wish for an enjoyable classroom experience, and hence their resistance to successive hours of control has multiple faces: they move and turn in their desks, talk and whisper, play with books and pencils, throw folded notes and sweets, repeatedly request permission to visit the bathroom, or just daydream and stare out of the window. The teachers' response is mostly loud and clear: "I am waiting for silence!!!!!" "Sit down!!!!!" "Not a single word!!!!!" Once shouting does no longer achieves its desired effect, teachers slam solid objects on their desk, mark minuses and low grades, stir fears of Mrs. Nour's rage, and eventually threaten to hit students with textbooks or rulers. "All of you, write four-hundred times 'I have to respect all my teachers and my friends. Never talk without taking permission'." Especially towards the end of the day, and towards the end of each semester, teachers become increasingly impatient, edgy, and ever less willing to positively engage with their students.

"The director expects us to shout," Leen's colleague Abir explains as we seek some respite in the school garden one afternoon. "A good classroom is a silent one. Any noise inside the classroom is unacceptable. Students have to obey the rules and be silent". Carine, however, brings up that she "would like to find other ways to control the students. But if Mrs. Nour hears any noise coming from my classroom she'll report me to the director as a bad teacher". Importantly, to teach in private schools, until recently no teaching diploma was required, which means that fresh graduates may enter the classroom with a background neither in pedagogy or didactics, nor in classroom management, not in critical learning or child development. "Teaching is something you're supposed to learn while doing," Carine explains. While high-end private schools offer supervision and in-service training, teachers in schools like Al

Qamar are offered neither the one nor the other. As a consequence, teaching work is marked by the use of verbal violence to maintain a degree of control over students; and the curious thing is, that this practice reflects positively back on Al Qamar's teachers in the eyes of school the school administration.

Abir offered an interesting take on the issue of verbal violence, noting that "shouting is a problem in our entire society. If you are loud, then it means that you're powerful. If you're gentle, then it means that you're weak." I ask if teachers are able to address this dilemma with the director. Abir's reply is in line with Hasan's opinion above: "honestly, the administration knows nothing about education. Once I requested support from their side, but they just told me that I am the teacher, so I should know how to deal with any issues." Overall, with no trust, supervision, or training available, the odds that teachers develop and practice alternative techniques to stimulate students' engagement are rather limited.

"Be prepared for a battle." Confronting parents' priorities and political affiliations

Aside from the school administration, colleagues, and students, there is a fourth category of protagonists who shape and confine teachers' work in important ways: students' parents. Parent involvement at Al Qamar is limited to biannual sessions to discuss students' academic performance. For teachers, these are rather unnerving occasions. On the designated day, Leen quickly drives home after her last class to change into formal clothing, apply make-up, and put on some serious high heels, explaining that she needs to "be prepared for a battle." She explains that "parents don't come to really ask about their children. No, they come to blame us for their low grades! They all think of their own child as the smartest and first student in class. If that's not the case, then they'll demand a higher grade and try to negotiate with us." A colleague adds that many parents don't even bother to attend parent-teacher meetings. "Parents just want their child to go to school, but they are not interested in how they perform and do not show up when we invite them."

Aside from walking on eggshells when discussing grades, teachers have to beware of an additional pitfall: dealing with politics. "Last year, a teacher was fired because she disagreed with March 8 [Lebanon's pro-Iranian political bloc spearheaded by Hezbollah]. A student told his parents who told the director to terminate her contract." Even though Abou Bilal claims Al Qamar to be isolated from the political forces that dominate life outside the school, teachers cannot but act extremely cautious when questions of politics arise. "Some parents are affiliated with powerful politicians. We simply can't afford to get into a debate with them," Carine explains. Director Abou Bilal prefers not to comment on this issue and reasserts that his school is "a space away from politics." He sighs, however, "as you know, in Lebanon, certain political parties are stronger than the government," implying that when push comes to shove, he cannot but give in to demands of local strongmen.

5.3 Exposure to armed conflicts marks teachers' biographies and teaching work

The day after a day of nationwide, violent strife, Al Qamar is open as if nothing happened – just as occurred in the aftermath of similar armed clashes, two roadside bomb attacks near the school, deadly confrontations in the nearby refugee camp, crossfire on the border with Israel, assassinations of political figures, terror attacks nearby or in Beirut, abductions, and when gunfire overrides teachers' voices during burials of Hezbollah militants killed in Syria. "We are used to living with violence. We know that life goes on," Abou Bilal explains. Throughout the schoolyear, a range of violent events and the anticipation of many others cast a shadow over everyday life and work, but the urge to prevent the everyday from being interrupted is stronger and only challenged in exceptionally violent or disturbing circumstances, which may compel schools to shut down for a day or more as a preventive or curative measure.

An example of this is the aftermath of the 34-day war between Hezbollah and Israel in 2006, which I will discuss based on research in Al Arz school in Haret Hreik, a suburb of Beirut which is considered a Hezbollah stronghold. Al Arz is a light, two-storey building in a densely populated and traffic-loaded area inhabited by urban dwellers, many of whom originally hail from South Lebanon and the eastern Beqaa Valley. Crammed between buildings, a small playground is situated at the back of the school. Contrary to Al Qamar, little green spaces can be found in or around the school building. Since the war was fought during the summer holidays, teaching at Al Arz was not interrupted. Nevertheless, the impact on teachers' lives was high. Material and environmental damage was extensive across the country, as thousands of homes and shops were damaged or destroyed alongside factories and power plants, bridges, roads, ports and airport, but also hospitals and schools. Haret Hreik was targeted in particular, as it was believed to house key Hezbollah infrastructure and leadership. Maya, a grade six English language teacher in Al Arz, recalls how worried she was that her school had not survived the bombardments:

The war ended at 8 pm. I was here, at school, at 8.15. There was no single soul on the streets. Only a chicken with no head, right in front of the school. I do not know why it was there. Perhaps it was shot. And many leaflets, which had been dropped by Israeli planes over [Haret Hreik]. All the windows of the school were broken, there was glass all over the place. But, thank God, the building was still intact.

Her colleague Selma points out the destruction from the school's balcony which overlooks parts of the suburb, the suburb where Hezbollah has its offices and enjoys great popular support. "Behind these trees, right in front of the school, there used to be a building. They [the Israeli army] hit this area many times because they believed that Hezbollah people were hiding here. But of course they had left [Haret Hreik] long before the bombs fell. So instead they killed many civilians, mostly women and children – you can check the statistics. Merciless is the crucial way of describing what happened."

Many teachers from Al Qamar and Al Arz found their own homes damaged or destroyed on returning after the cessation of hostilities. This caused them high levels of anxiety and stress which, they noticed, faded only slowly and occasionally flared up once normal life had resumed. Besides material damage, several teachers also incurred the loss of beloved ones and the unsettling experience of displacement, bombardment, panic, and fear. "Life was under constant threat," Maya described. "Every soul felt threatened. The feeling that you might die today! Refugees, catastrophe, families sheltered in schools, it was beyond catastrophic." As long as there was electricity, TVs were always on to follow the latest developments. "There were many horrible, terrifying pictures on TV. The Qana bombardment, we were following it step by step. We were witnessing live how dead children were found and taken out of the rubble."

The stress of war also triggered long-forgotten memories in teachers. Lebanon's civil war (1975-1990) surfaced repeatedly during discussions as a significant point of reference. Rima, a math teacher at Al Arz, recalled how she, during that "terrible summer" of 2006, "started buying food, water, and medication for weeks, just

like we did during the civil war. We had no idea how the situation would develop." Her colleague Selma observed how "everybody's memories of the civil war were opened," and Rima noted, likewise, how "this war brought back all the horrible experiences." For younger teachers like Maya, who were children themselves during the civil war, the recent war experience shed new light on their childhoods. "It was a different

experience for our generation, compared to the civil war: we learned that the burden of war is heavier as an adult. Now we felt responsible, whereas children completely rely on their parents – just like we did ourselves during the previous wars.” Rima highlights how difficult parenting is under circumstances of war. “As a parent you should not frighten your children, you should not show any stress. Children pick up your fear, your panic, your anxiety. So we had to pretend that we were strong. But we weren’t strong at all...” Aside from the divergence between the experiences of war of children and those of adults, Selma highlights a contrast between the civil war and 2006: “this war [2006] presented a new kind of uncertainty. During the civil war, at least you knew who was fighting whom and in which street. It was mainly bullets and stuff. This time, it was airplanes and bombs from the air. It was arbitrary, merciless killing.”

The ceasefire and subsequent return to school, even if delayed by a couple of weeks due to reconstruction works, was a relief to most teachers. “It was difficult to be back at work,” Maya remembers, “but it felt as liberation. It offered security. During the war we did not know if we would ever get back to work again, if we would receive a salary at the end of the month, if we would be able to take care of our family. That put a huge burden on us.” Moreover, returning back to school allowed teachers to be away from home and feel the support of colleagues, without necessarily sharing their stories in detail. “I missed my colleagues over summer. It was good to be back and return to normality,” Shireen added. Maya recalls how teachers among themselves agreed that “even though we just lived through a hard experience, and even though we felt anxious and nervous, it should not affect our work.”

5.4 Teachers’ tools to confront conflict inside the classroom

The return to a sense of normality that teachers embraced was constrained, however, by the ways in which students responded to wartime events. “We were faced with students who had just experienced a war. Students had to adjust again to normal life,” Rima explains. “They were unstable. It took time to have them follow school regulations again, and to give them a new purpose in life.” Rima recalled that her students “were scared and afraid. Some were more than scared. They had to release their tension, which reflected in their work. They did not achieve up to their normal level. [...] We talked about their experiences, about destruction, about what had happened to their neighbours. And whenever they wanted, they could come to us and talk in private.” However, teachers were hardly prepared to take on such counselling responsibilities. Rima explains that “the first hour of my first class we spent talking about the war. But we did not go into details. I think that was enough. I did not talk with students in private.” Other teachers refused to talk about the war at all. Director Bassem argued that “there was and is a high need for counsellors, psychotherapists, and social workers in schools. This should come from the Ministry of Education, but we didn’t hear from them at all.”

Post-war efforts to return to a sense of normalcy were thwarted by a rapid increase in internal political and sectarian tensions. Frequent, deadly street clashes (such as in January 2007 and May 2008) alternated with a continuation of high-profile assassinations and terror attacks, alongside lower-profile strife across the country, which has been fuelled by spill-overs of the conflict in Syria since 2011. Al Arz director Bassem observed anxiously how “immediately after the war, internal conflicts started again and a very unstable situation developed.” He explains that “students aged five to eight are already aware of political differences. We start to face difficulties with children aged around ten. In the higher grades, we see real divisions inside the classroom.”

At Al Qamar Hassan explains, while seated on his peaceful balcony, that “ninety-five percent of students at Al Qamar are Shi’a Muslims, which automatically makes them close to Haraket Amal and Hezbollah [two leading Shi’a Muslim, Iran-affiliated political movements]. As pro-Iranian March 8 forced the collapse of the March 14-led government in 2011, rifts between members of the school community become instantly visible. As teacher Carine entered the playground, for instance, a group of twelve year-old girls surrounded her, yelling

<i>Students</i>	<i>Miss, we are very angry with you!</i>
<i>Carine</i>	<i>Really? Why is that?</i>
<i>Students</i>	<i>Because you’re not with us!</i>
<i>Carine</i>	<i>What do you mean?</i>
<i>Students</i>	<i>Well, you are from [a Sunni Muslim village]!</i>
<i>Carine</i>	<i>So what? I am with no one!</i>
<i>Students</i>	<i>So you’re not with Hariri?!</i>
<i>Carine</i>	<i>I am with no one!</i>
<i>Students</i>	<i>Oh Miss, but then we love you!</i>

One may rightly wonder if political divisions are indeed of such great concern to students. Both in my research with students and in conversations with teachers it became evident that political conflict has a profound impact on students’ lives. In the lowest grades, students nickname one another after the political leaders they supposedly support and are proficient in the use of symbols, colour codes, and jargon associated with sectarian political conflict in the country. They would, half-jokingly, ask “Miss, why are you using yellow chalk? Are you with Hezbollah?”, relate the colour of clothes or notebooks to political parties, and stick images of leaders and party icons on their files. During breaks they would play political tunes from their mobile phones, discuss the news, and recall speeches until a teacher approaches. Not infrequently, parents play a role in stirring divisions. At Al Arz, teachers recalled how they invited students to bring magazines to school to compile a collage on Lebanon’s historical sites. “Some parents gave their children political magazines and they started cutting out pictures of party leaders and distributing them along sectarian lines. Divisions became instantly visible inside the classroom.”

Waves of stress and divisions among students run parallel to political developments in the country. Al Qamar’s director Abou Bilal: “There is a cycle. If political tensions between parties rise, then students get hyper and find it hard to concentrate. If tensions decrease again, then life in school gets easier as well.” Around the toppling of Hariri’s cabinet by Hezbollah and its allies in 2011, for instance, as roads were blocked and fights erupted across the country while heavy celebratory gunfire surrounded the school, fights among students gained in frequency and intensity, and so did restlessness and confusion inside the classroom, agitation among students and teachers, and other stress-induced encounters. Such tension is hard to contain for teachers, since any comment can be interpreted as disloyalty to certain political currents that are dominant in the school, with all possible repercussions.

Therefore, heavy sanctions are imposed on whoever starts a political or sectarian debate, regardless if this is a student, teacher, or other staff member. “Everybody talks,” Maya explains, “but in my class there is not a single word said about politics. It is prohibited.” Students are suspended for days or even dismissed altogether if they breach this rule; “Mr. Bassem is extremely strict in this and he already expelled students who discussed politics during a break.”

Muting contentious subjects is widely promoted by directors and teachers as the only way to shield schools from becoming arenas of strife. “Children hear about politics all day long, from their parents, on TV, and they discuss politics among themselves,” Maya complains. “You should see school as a time out of politics. Here, education is important, not politics.” Director Bassem adds that he knows of schools where clashes took

place, and how in response he and his teachers “try to take politics off students’ minds, to make them forget about the war. To make them respect diversity.”

Interestingly, at the same time, teachers and directors are aware that silencing contentious issues will not contribute to resolving discord in the country. “In the end we should discuss these issues, but not now,” says Selma. “But we don’t need another war. I don’t want my children to feel war. It’s destructive. I can still feel the glass of windows falling on the floor from the time I was young.” Director Bassem argues that “now is not the time for discussions. Differences are at their max right now. We try to teach students a sense of unity and respect, but society goes in exactly the opposite direction. As soon as students walk out of the school, divisions are highlighted.” “School alone cannot make the difference,” he asserts. “In all parts of society there must be efforts to reach stability.” I would not be able to find a better way of conveying that crucial point.

6. Conclusion

This paper started out by listing some of the expectations that policy makers and academics have invested in teachers working in societies affected by armed conflict. Teachers are thought to act as peacebuilders, guardians of quality education, and catalysts of political change, among other things. These expectations are based on the presumption that teachers enjoy solid training that enables them to set up conflict-sensitive and learner appropriate classrooms. Accordingly, it is argued, teachers can play a central role in fulfilling education’s promise as catalyst of conflict transformation, democratisation, and social cohesion.

At the same time, however, a different body of scholarship cautions that education is neither a panacea nor an inherently benign force. It may just as well promote and reinforce divisions, discord, and repression. Observing the massive funding and attention momentum that education in conflict currently enjoys, these scholars call for research that situates schooling in its relevant socio-political context instead of isolating it from its surroundings, and to lend our ears to the experiences and priorities of education’s main stakeholders: teachers and students. Accordingly, a more in-depth understanding of the linkages between education and conflict can be achieved, which will favour the development of interventions and tools that are aligned with the actual lived realities of teachers and learners in conflict zones.

This paper, then, presented the findings of ethnographic field research with Lebanese elementary school teachers. Based on nine months of close participant observation amid a succession of armed confrontations of different character, research findings point at four factors that are key to understanding teachers’ experiences, challenges, and priorities and, accordingly, the ways in which teachers’ peacebuilding potential is likely to be confined. These factors are closely interrelated, as the ethnography showed. Moreover, a reading of literature that touches upon teaching work in situations of conflict reflects similar aspects as main concerns. Although the findings described in the ethnography relate to specific schools in Lebanon, they point at more general factors and are therefore likely to have at least some bearing in other educational settings in Lebanon and abroad, which should be subject of further research.

The first factor of our analytical framework captures the ways in which armed conflict shapes teachers’ ability to live up to the above expectations concerns the social, political, economic, and institutional context of teaching. The data point at contextual factors such as weak central governance, weak rule of law, large degrees of autonomy on behalf of school administrators, nepotism and corruption, lack of transparency, unchecked capitalism, and an absence of enforcement mechanisms for educational and pedagogical standards. By themselves, and particularly when combined, these factors tend to cause teachers to consider their employment as insecure, unstable, unvalued, and incapacitated. Arguably, each of these contextual factors is an attribute of decades (if not centuries) of armed strife and insecurity that has fostered a political and institutional culture in which rights-holders face great challenges in holding duty bearers to account. The exact linkages between manifestations of violent conflict and the underlying political and economic dynamics is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is safe to assume that teachers’ ability to act as catalysts of change is debilitated by the context in which they pursue their professional duties.

Second, this context has a bearing on the relationships and communication of teachers with their direct counterparts: school administrators, colleagues, students, and parents. The lack of accountability and stability offered by their superiors translates into a hierarchical structure in which teachers experience little encouragement to develop themselves professionally or engage in peer-to-peer discussions on didactic challenges and practices. Instead, the professional culture among teachers tends to be marked by distrust and withdrawal. Relations with students, in turn, are mixed: on the one hand, students provide teachers with a sense of fulfilment and purpose, while on the other hand, teachers are compelled to quell students’ voices and initiatives as they contradict what school administrators may consider the main condition for teaching: controlling students and maintaining silence whatever. Teachers also feel little encouragement to engage parents in students’ education. Parents merely visit the school to follow up on academic achievements of their offspring and introduce political power play that leaves teachers even more vulnerable to blackmail and dismissal.

Third, teachers’ work is marked by their own experiences of armed conflict and the venues they find to give meaning to violent events. Loss, displacement, trauma, grief, and insecurity shape teachers’ personal lives but just as much affect their professional ones. The perceived responsibility to shield their own children as well as their students from violence, anxiety, and stress is acknowledged across the board. This urge is immediately tied to the limited means that adults have to do so in the face of ubiquitous media exposure, discussions, and signs of strife.

Teachers’ primary response to armed conflict consists, therefore, of seeking to ban conflict from the school premises, much alike the tendency of optimistic scholars and practitioners to isolate schooling from its socio-political surroundings and consider it an isolated seed for change. Accordingly, the fourth factor that defines how teachers engage with conflict and change is perhaps the most striking one, as it unveils the limited means teachers have at their disposal to address, channel, and defuse pervasive strife as it permeates the school environment in tangible and veiled ways. This relative powerlessness in the face of conflict can be attributed to the three factors mentioned above, as well as to the ways in which curricula, textbooks, teacher training, didactics, and modes of assessment tend to reinforce rather than challenge conflict dynamics. “School as a space away from politics” is little more than a fantasy. Students, teachers, school administrators, and parents all bring along their political identities and preoccupation with life in conflict, whether intentionally or not.

Are the observations and factors outlined above unique to a situation of armed conflict? Certainly not. However, they may accumulate and manifest themselves in acute ways in contexts in

which insecurity and violence are most tangible. Evidently, there is a lot of work to do in order to advance our understanding of teachers' contributions to conflict transformation, and the support teachers need to fulfil their peacebuilding potential. Therefore, this article concludes with some suggestions as to where to concentrate our efforts.

6. Recommendations

This study of the lived realities of teaching renders a range of recommendations that can enable actors in the education sector to devise means to support teachers in ways that are in line with their needs, experiences and priorities.

- Ensure proper representation of teachers in the design of curricula, tools, and interventions
- Strengthen teacher syndicates and representation in decision-making bodies such as Ministries of Education and curriculum development agencies
- Strengthen oversight of the private education sector, including teacher certification and quality of school management.
- Provide training to school administrators on education sector objectives and priorities, teachers' rights, pedagogy, good governance in schools, and conflict resolution
- Set up or activate teacher committees in schools. These can be forums to raise awareness of teachers' rights and ways to attain these rights by liaising with teacher syndicates and other national, representative bodies. Teacher committees can also serve as self-support groups and forums to identify further training and support needs
- Include conflict resolution modules in pre- and in-service teacher training curricula
- Provide in-service teacher training based on needs identified by teachers, e.g. on classroom management, positive discipline, assessment, participative modes of instruction, and dealing with parents
- Stimulate the establishment of parent-teacher councils to act as intermediaries between parents and teachers
- Offer school-based counselling in the wake of episodes of extreme violence and provide teachers with tools to identify, support, and refer students who face heightened stress and potential trauma.

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